

Personal contact with non-Westerners reduces discrimination by Dutch youth

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Abstract

Contact theory (Allport, 1954) proposes that prejudices towards an outgroup may be reduced when individuals have personal contact with members from the outgroup. Ample empirical evidence suggests that individuals who frequently interact with an outgroup have less biased attitudes. Whether this relationship is causal and in which direction the causality runs is hard to establish, however. We run a field experiment in which high school pupils engage in a group assignment during an introductory lecture at a Dutch university. Each group is accompanied by a university undergraduate which, by random assignment, is either a native Dutch student or a student with Arabic - North African roots. A month later the high school pupils participate in two experimental games in which they are randomly assigned to a partner with either a native Dutch or an Arabic first name. We find that contact with a non-native undergraduate student during the introductory lecture significantly reduces the behavioral bias against a partner with an Arabic first name. This only holds, however, for pupils who have no prior exposure to non-native pupils in their school class.